

Testimony of Dr. Ronald Walters to U. S. House of Representatives on H. R. 40 Reparations Bill

I am pleased to be able to attend this hearing, sponsored by the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (NCOBRA) and hosted by the Dean of the Congressional Black Caucus, Congressman John Conyers today, in order to contribute to the demand for the passage of H. R. 40. I want to applaud Congressman Conyers in his valiant and persistent attempt to put before the American people a just case for their consideration, the case that Reparations for people of African descent deserves serious study by the construction of a Commission for that purpose.

I come to the table as one who has done my fair share of proposing the case for Reparations in the public sphere over the course of the last 30 years, educated first of all by the recently deceased James Forman, who dramatically proposed it in May of 1969, but who, in the 1970s often came to my office at Howard University to discuss it. I also appear as a charter Board member of NCOBRA and as a member of the Reparations Coordinating Committee, founded by TransAfrica.

I want to note that while Blacks, through Congressman Conyers and through the outstanding work of NCOBRA, Deadra Forman Peallman, and the RCC, continue to plea for a rightful hearing on the subject of Reparations, Reparations continues to be given other groups at this moment in history and denied to African Americans, despite the profound veracity of the African holocaust of slavery and post-slavery racial subjugation in America.

Partly this arises because many Americans believe that the debt has already been paid by the episodic attempts of the U. S. Government to foster various remedial public policies. In truth, the Federal government has done so in only four brief moments in history: during the Reconstruction period from 1865-1876 (11 years); during the Roosevelt/Truman years 1932-1948 (16 years); during the Kennedy/Johnson era 1960-1972 (8 years) and most recently during the Clinton administration 1992-2000 (8 years) – for a total of 43 of the last 140 years. Most of the other times, conservative movements have literally eviscerated those gains as they almost succeeded in doing today.

The result is that although Black Americans have made considerable strides, we are not yet equal – and my contribution to the demand for Reparations has rested not just on the fact of slavery and post slavery racial subordination of Blacks, but that this racial system been the most important fact in the current inequality between the races. Ordinary Blacks speak of this constantly. For example, in my home town newspaper (The Wichita Voice)

a current article says: "ask white Americans who think that Blacks are equal what exactly they are talking about and you'll hear about Oprah, Michael Jordan, Condoleezza and Colin Powell." But the writer goes on to paint a different picture rooted in the real challenges that most blacks face today. The writer goes on to say that the problems that blacks experience today are defined by the census data as a condition under-girdled by:

- a substantial wealth gap of 10-1;
- a stunning series of health gaps in a variety of diseases;
- a gap in home ownership of 25%;
- a gap in proportional poverty double that of whites, at 25%-30%;
- a gap in college enrollment double that of whites;

All have to do with the framework of American racial Apartheid that was bounded by the denial of adequate resources with which to make our citizenship a reality.

Reparations are needed because the reality is that if we were to move at the current pace it would take perhaps another century, or not even then, to catch up with the majority. Frank Raines, former head of the Office of Management and Budget during the Clinton administration and most recently head of Fannie Mae made a telling observation in the 2002 edition of the State of Black America. In answer to the question he posed to his staff to determine what equality would look like. He said that we would need:

- 700,000 more jobs;
- \$190 billion more pay;
- \$1 trillion more wealth;
- 31 more billionaires;
- 2 million more holders of high school diplomas;
- 2.5 million more blacks with health insurance;
- 700,000 fewer prisoners;
- 600,000 more businesses with \$2.7 trillion more in revenues;
- nearly 1,500 members of Congress instead of the 43 we have today.

Mr. Raines' calculations proves the obvious, that there is a straight line from slavery to many of the conditions that Black people face in America today, that there is a responsibility factor America denies for the past in this respect, while ceding the justice of the past to other groups, to the Native Americans, to the Japanese, to Jews, to Hawaiians, and others.

The demand for Reparations for African descendant peoples has become the subject of much public discussion, including the ridicule of conservative talk radio and self-

described experts who have risen from the dust to oppose it. As one who has often been involved in such debate, I have often had to entertain a series of questions, such as:

- Who would receive Reparations, how would they prove that they were decedents of former slaves?
- What would the amount be and how would it be determined and dispersed?
- To what causes would Reparations be contributed if it were granted?
- And many others.

I have consistently avoided attempting to answer these questions, first because African Americans are the only group that is expected to be defensive about the demand for Reparations and to have to entertain a series of ridiculous questions in the public realm. Rather, I have responded that other groups have had the benefit of a dignified process, legitimized by the Congress, which has addressed such questions and negotiated a series of proposals for redress. I would expect nothing less in this case and to settle for the continued acrimonious battle about Reparations fits squarely into the conservative agenda of avoiding the real issues. So, I would urge support for H., R. 40 as a dignified way to begin the consideration of issues that have been handed in other countries such as South Africa, Germany, Chile and others.

Thank you very much.